

Who's Not To Blame?

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Since they were deploying to Iraq soon, the unit's leadership scheduled a night convoy training mission. They arranged the date, time and route and ensured the training vehicles were operational. The commander's intent was to familiarize his Marines with driving under blackout lights and night vision goggles while maintaining dispersion and intervals and maneuvering around obstacles.

All primary and assistant drivers were supposed to wear NVGs and drive under blackout lights through the pre-planned route. The written plan required road guards and signs stating "NVG Driving" to be posted at intersections along the route. No vehicles would be permitted to cross or operate on the paved roads with blackout lights.

The route was a dirt road that crossed a rural highway at two points a little more than a quarter-mile apart. Two road guards wearing fluorescent vests were posted at each crossing to ensure the convoy's safe passage across the 55-mph highway. The guards were supposed to stop the convoy, ensure the highway was clear and direct the vehicles across the intersection when it was safe.

The mission briefer told the drivers to pay close attention to the guards' directions. To help the drivers see the intersections under NVGs, the guards placed infrared glow sticks on both sides of the highway at each crossing. However, they didn't post the required signs at the intersections.

The exercise started without a hitch but was delayed early on when a vehicle suffered mechanical problems. Maintainers fixed the vehicle and the convoy continued through the first intersection. Things started going badly, however, when the convoy approached the second crossing point.

The lead vehicle was a low-back HMMWV that contained four Marines. The driver was fresh out of driving school, but his assistant driver already had one Iraq deployment under his belt. The driver had never operated a HMMWV with NVGs before, so the assistant driver was helping him along the route.

As the convoy approached the second intersection, the two guards stood on opposite sides of the road to look for oncoming traffic. One of the guards saw the headlights of an oncoming vehicle about a quarter-mile away and started walking in its direction, waving his flashlight in a stopping motion. The guard quickly realized the vehicle was a speeding tractor-trailer.

Meanwhile, the lead HMMWV approached the intersection, its driver unaware of the oncoming vehicle and still under blackout lights. The assistant driver told him to pay attention to the road guards because they'd let him know when it was safe to cross. As the HMMWV entered the intersection, the guard who'd spotted the semi motioned his flashlight for the driver to stop while the other guard ran toward the vehicle to stop it.

The HMMWV's driver, however, took cues from his assistant driver to keep moving forward. Neither he nor the assistant driver looked left or right before entering the roadway. The driver believed the flashlight signals coming from the guard meant keep driving rather than stop, so he continued driving into the intersection. Seconds later, the semi driver realized a vehicle was crossing his path and slammed on the brakes, but the truck broadsided the HMMWV's passenger side.

The HMMWV was pushed sideways almost 30 feet and totaled. Two of the Marines suffered broken femurs while the other two, although badly shaken, escaped with only minor injuries. According to the traffic investigation, the semi was traveling about 55 mph when its driver slammed on the brakes. Fortunately, the truck was carrying only a forklift on a flatbed; if it had been carrying a fully loaded trailer, the accident probably would've been much worse.

Why did this accident happen? First, the unit didn't follow its own plan to have signs indicating NVG driver training posted at the intersections. Second, vehicles were supposed to cross the highway with their headlights on. Third, the road guards clearly didn't understand their responsibilities. They thought one was supposed to stop civilian traffic while the other would stop the convoy in case of oncoming vehicles. Finally, the HMMWV's driver, new to NVGs, was disoriented and failed to look left or right before crossing the intersection.

This accident could've been prevented if the unit's leaders and individual Marines had followed their own plan and procedures. There's no such thing as a "simple mission," and leaders at every level must ensure their troops understand and follow instructions. Remember, however, that sometimes you have to be that leader and speak up when you know something isn't right.

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